

“Church Fathers”

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, June 19, 2011
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

“We keep their faith, if not their creed.”

Rank by rank, this morning, we join in the march of Universalism that began, in this part of the country, now nearly two hundred years ago. You are, no doubt, familiar with the term “church fathers” – but probably associate that phrase with men whose names are prefaced with “Saint,” such as Augustine, or men who planted the seeds that led to modern church structures such as Martin Luther or John Calvin.

But this morning, as we celebrate Fathers Day, I want to make you aware of another set of church fathers – *our* church fathers, as it were – ours, right here in Cincinnati, right here at Heritage Church. Names like Singer and Sargent, Rogers and Waldo, Kidwell and Case, may not be household names, but it is my hope that, at least for one day, they might become important names in *your* household, because I encourage you to think about, and to discuss, the stories I am about to share.

As you know, I am very fond of history in general, and church history in particular. It is probably a good thing – and perhaps no coincidence – that I was called to serve a congregation named “Heritage.” Here, I never seem to run out of new discoveries about the roots of our faith – roots that, in the words of the hymn we just sang, are, I believe, the “fount of our power.” And these new discoveries have been coming fast and furious this spring. Much of what I will be telling you, this morning, comes from two books I was excited to find, online, in recent weeks – “The Universalist Church in Ohio,” by Elmo Arnold Robinson, and “To Preach and Fight: Universalism in the Queen City from 1800-1849,” by David A. Johnson. Both books will be available in our Heritage Room archival library when I am done fully reading and digesting them. By the way, my thanks go out to our outstanding church archivist, Mike Roberts, for all his help.

My personal interest in our history was sharpened even further, over Memorial Day weekend, when I was asked by the Hopedale UU Community in Oxford to preach at the site of the Bunker Hill Pioneer Universalist Cemetery.

There is a picture of me, taken that day, in your bulletin – but I will just say, for today’s purposes, how cool it was to see an old *Universalist* cemetery, at the site of one of the dozens of old, now defunct Universalist churches that are marked on the map which is also reproduced in your bulletin. My most striking memory of that day was learning that two brothers – one who fought for the Union in the Civil War, and one who fought for the Confederacy – had been buried there, together. There was something profoundly symbolic – and tangibly *Universalist* – about the final disposition of these two men.

But let me now go back, to the beginning. Any discussion of what might be considered our “church fathers” must begin with at least a mention of a man named, appropriately enough, Origen – that’s O-r-i-g-E-n – who, actually, is considered one of the Christian church fathers, though, you will note that unlike almost every other of the so-called fathers of the church, his name is not “Saint” Origen – because his views, particularly on universal salvation, were deemed heresy, in his own time, and ever since.

It was Origen who made the most educated and eloquent case, against all prevailing opinion in the third century, for a variety of theological positions that would later characterize Universalism: a symbolic rather than the literal interpretation of the Bible, denial of the supernatural within scripture, most notably Jesus’ resurrection, and – more to the point – the idea that all people, rather than some elect or select few, would find salvation.

Without Origen as a theological ancestor, it is hard to imagine how we would be sitting here, today.

Skipping forward some 1500 years, we come to a story that, though many of you have heard it before, bears repeating – both because it recounts how Universalism came to the shores of America, and because we like to think of it as our own little “miracle story.” John Murray was a British Methodist who had converted to Universalism, been excommunicated, and become something of a controversial preacher in and around London. In 1770, family tragedy and public hostility combined to make Murray flee to America, where he intended to renounce the religious life and live the rest of his days in anonymity.

But the ship on which Murray was traveling ran aground in a storm off the coast of New Jersey – and here, I can’t resist saying that, although I’ve never watched the TV show of the same name, I have always found it amusing that Universalism was born in America on “The Jersey Shore.”

At any rate, Murray and the other lost passengers were taken in by a farmer named Thomas Potter, who – get this – had, ten years earlier, built a small chapel on his rather isolated property, in the belief that God would send him a preacher. Talk about the power of faith!

Remember, though, that Murray had come to the New World to escape religion, not perpetuate it. Though shaken to his very core by Potter's proclamation, and by the chapel that seemed to have been built specifically for him, Murray steadfastly refused to preach. At last, it was agreed that, if the winds did not shift and the storm did not abate by Sunday morning, Murray would take that as a sign that he was to preach.

Guess what? The ship was still stranded there on the morning of Sunday, Sept. 30, 1770, where it is generally agreed that the first Universalist sermon in America was given by John Murray to Potter, his wife and children, and a few curious neighboring farmers. Murray went on to establish several Universalist churches in both the countryside and the new cities of America, and became the very first Chaplain of the United States Army.

Without John Murray as a theological ancestor, it is hard to imagine that we would be sitting here, today. Among other things, Murray helped establish the practice of Universalist "circuit riding," in which a particularly eloquent or passionate preacher would ride by horseback, from village to village, sharing the Universalist version of the gospel – that all, not just some, were saved – with anyone who was willing to hear.

Within a generation after John Murray, America had expanded westward, and Cincinnati had become the boom town of the western frontier. Its ideal location on the Ohio River made it a mecca for rough pioneers and wealthy merchants alike – but, lest we romanticize those Old West days, I offer you this passage from the memoirs of Erasmus Manford, one of Universalism's early itinerant preachers:

"I went to Cincinnati by stage[coach], and oh, what roads! There were no railroads then... It was mud, mud, mug – nothing but mud. Stiff, black, deep mud. I forget how many times the stage broke down, how many horses were killed, or how many times all hands had to get out into the ocean of mud, and pry the stage out." After Cincinnati, Manford goes on to recount a journey to preach to receptive Universalist crowds in Mount Healthy, Hamilton, Oxford, Middletown and Dayton.

In this trek, he was following the trail blazed by Abel Morgan Sargeant, whom history regards as the first circuit rider preaching a message of universal salvation in Ohio, beginning in the year 1800. Sargeant was not so much hoping to establish multiple Universalist congregations, though, as messianically seeking to create a new church which he, himself, would oversee – which he called the Halcyon Church of Christ in Columbia, along the Ohio River. He was, by all accounts, a flamboyant figure who was not above using spectacular theatrics to make his point – as this description from a contemporary named Peter Cartwright reveals:

“One Sunday night, at our camp meeting, the good Rev. Sargeant got some powder, lit a cigar, and then walked down to the bank of the river, one hundred yards, where stood a large stump. He put his powder on the stump, and touched it with his cigar. The flash of powder was seen by many at the camp; at least, the light. When the powder flashed, down fell Sargeant, [and] there he lay a good while. In the meantime, the people found him lying there, and gathered around him.

“At length, he came to, and said he had a message from God to [the] Methodists. He said God had come down to him, in a flash of light, and he fell under the power of God, and thus received his vision.”

As strange and alien to us as both his method and his message may seem, it is hard to imagine how we would be sitting here, today, without Abel Morgan Sargeant, who planted the seed of Universalism in the region, and whose colorful antics foreshadowed the growing tensions between those professing a Universalist faith, and the more orthodox Protestants who were the movers and shakers of Cincinnati society at the time. A generation after Sargeant, that conflict would help shape the formation and growth of the First Universalist Society of Cincinnati – which brings us, to us.

In the spring of 1827, fresh with the excitement built during a four-week preaching stint in town by the itinerant preacher Eliphalet Case, a courageous band of Universalists purchased land on Elm Street, erected a building, and called as their first minister the Rev. Josiah Crosby Waldo. Almost immediately, they came under attack from the local Presbyterian minister, Joshua L. Wilson. The “infidels,” as our church fathers and mothers were called, dared to form a school for their children and thus spare them indoctrination at the Presbyterian-run school, which was apparently at the time the only game in town.

Heated rhetoric between Wilson, on the Presbyterian side, and Jonathan Kidwell, an outspoken lay preacher in the First Universalist Society who was much more pugnacious than the conciliatory Rev. Waldo, boiled over when Wilson took the provocative step of purchasing a home across the street from the Universalist meeting house. Soon, mobs of unruly citizens, spurred on by Wilson’s repeated verbal attacks on the “infidels” in both the pulpit and the paper, were throwing stones through the windows of the Universalist church – once, as one of our unnamed church fathers wrote in a letter, just “narrowly missing the stove pipe and frightening the delicate, impressionable female members of the choir.” (I thought that quote might get your attention!)

At any rate, one Wednesday evening during a candlelight service, no doubt in order to protect our delicate church mothers, some church fathers hid just outside the building, and chased down the rock-throwing culprits. Among them was the Presbyterian minister’s son.

Is it any wonder that the history of Universalism in the Queen City in the first half of the 19th century was titled “To Preach and [To] Fight”?

But Mother Nature proved to be an even more dangerous foe than the Presbyterians. A flood in late 1831, followed by an outbreak of cholera the next spring, devastated the city, and with it, our congregational ancestors. Church members died, Rev. Waldo was called back East to attend to his family, and the congregation foundered, eventually selling its building and going, for a time, out of business.

Into this dire situation rode, literally, another itinerant minister from the East, this one both eloquent *and* educated. A young man named George Rogers was persuaded by one of our church’s founding members, Enion Singer, to extend his westward circuit all the way to Cincinnati. Singer offered Rogers room and board for two weeks. In return, Rogers offered the eager Universalists in Cincinnati 17 sermons in the span of 14 days, filling the downtown Mechanics Institute Hall to overflowing.

Like John Murray, Rogers was a former Methodist who, in his attempts to convince a Universalist friend of the errors of their way, had actually ended up, himself, being converted to Universalism. It is safe to say that we definitely would not be sitting here, today, if it weren’t for George Rogers.

Having revived Universalism in Cincinnati, though, Rogers soon outgrew our church, and moved on to become the leading Universalist preacher in the southwest Ohio region. The map in your bulletin reflects the success with which he met; as the featured speaker at the Miami Universalist Association’s meeting in Amelia in the summer of 1836, he preached to an estimated crowd of more than 2,000.

The mid-19th century proved to be the heyday of the Queen City – and for Universalism in the Queen City as well. By 1840 there were *four* different Universalist congregations in town. The other three all eventually fell into decline, and were absorbed in one way or another into our church – as was, nearly a century later, Unity Temple. Thus, there are many church fathers and mothers, from many different branches of our religious family tree, whose names will remain unrecorded in the history books, but whom we also honor and celebrate this morning.

No roll call of our church fathers would be complete, however, without mention of two men who you *have* heard of, on multiple occasions, from this pulpit. Robert Cummins, the 27th minister of this congregation, served at a time when First Universalist Church was one of the flagship Universalist churches in the country, with hundreds of worshippers gathering each Sunday in a beautiful sanctuary on Essex Place in East Walnut Hills. Cummins went on to become the elected leader of the Universalist Church of America.

And then there was the staunchly independent 33rd minister of our church, Rev. Albert Q. Perry, who a generation later opposed the merger with the Unitarians, and convinced the congregation to vote against it. His ministry, and those times, had a profound influence on how we see ourselves, even today.

Of course, it would be both remiss, and risky, if I concluded without also giving mention to the many women who were, in every sense, “church mothers” to this congregation. From the first group of, as they put it, “at most a dozen females” who initially, in the words of one competing minister, “fell under the spell” of Sargeant’s preaching – to my predecessor, Rev. Elinor Artman, who in 1989 took the reins of a struggling church that could have easily gone the way of all the other little Universalist groups in southwest Ohio, and helped it grow and mature into the vibrant church it is today – women have played important, often irreplaceable roles in our congregational history. I think of the band of little old ladies who sat, right here, at the front of this new sanctuary, and supported the youngsters like the Grays and the Araujos and the Booths as they built a church for their children, and ours. I think of Muriel Steelman, whose brilliant inspiration resulted in the very name, “Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church.”

And I think, as always, of Olympia Brown, who paved the way for women like Elinor Artman, when she became the first American woman ordained as a minister by a religious denomination. As I have so often done in the past, I give Universalist minister Olympia Brown, the last word:

“Stand by this faith,” she said. “Work for it, and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important, as to be loyal to this faith, which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. [It] has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty, and made the world [more] beautiful... Rejoice, that we are worthy to be entrusted with [its] great message.”

May it ever be so!

Blessed be. Namaste. And amen.